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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 SANAA 002463

SIPDIS

STATE -- PASS TO USTDA MERCEDES FITCHETT.

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [YM](#) [AORCYM](#) [ECON](#) [COM](#)

SUBJECT: THE CITY OF TAIZ: WILL THE PHOENIX RISE AGAIN?

1. Summary: DCM visited the city of Taiz, the third largest city in Yemen to open bids for the the US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA)-funded wastewater system project and to meet with civic, NGO, and business leaders on August 18. Taiz stand on the shoulders of trained and passionate NGO, business, and community leaders; this small but strong concentration of leaders struggles and yet succeeds to build Taiz's community.

Women's Rights: Controversy on the Long and Difficult Road Ahead for Yemeni Women

2. DCM met with Suad AlQadasi, the Director of Women's Forum for Research and Training (WFRT) in Taiz. Established in 1999, WFRT has already become one of the leaders in women's NGO development in Yemen; five staff members support the various outreach, development, and project efforts of 13 affiliated NGOs. WFRT stands apart from other women's groups with a demonstrated willingness to tackle taboo subjects in Yemeni society and challenge the community and the government to become more involved with women's rights.

3. WFRT believes advancements in women's rights will come about as a byproduct of democratic reform. Toward this end, WFRT created a committee of influential religious leaders and legislators in Yemen, some of whom are dedicated supporters of women's rights. One of the imams wrote and produced a publication in support of women's rights which garnered strong objections from other leaders and parts of the community. Other members of the community read his writing and are slowly trending toward support of these religious arguments. In grass roots actions like these, the women's rights movement in Yemen will gain small but growing impact in the community.

4. Along with other women's groups' leaders in Yemen, WFRT established the Simple Women Court House in which WFRT analyzed the law, investigated government officials, and issued symbolic verdicts against the government. On its web site (www.wfirt.net), WFRT published the verdict as well as their demands for greater support of women's rights. The WFRT continues its passionate work through two current major research projects on violence against women and on children's sexual exploitation and trafficking.

5. Using a variety of communication methods, WFRT reaches out and educates the community on issues such as domestic violence. Its website is one of the most thorough and current NGO websites in Yemen with English and Arabic translations of legislation, research reports, newsletters, and other publications. Due to budget constraints, WFRT does not at present distribute publications by mail; WFRT does distribute educational and information materials to six governorates by contracting taxi drivers to deliver the materials for distribution by staff in each governorate.

6. WFRT is committed to reaching out to the young people and to the international community. WFRT works with the Civic Education Center in California as well as other centers in Jordan and Tunisia. In addition, WFRT established "The Ideal Village" in Alturba District in Taiz that encouraged men and women to form a village council and solve their problems by voting democratically. WFRT also met educational leaders in Taiz and discussed ways to uncover mistakes in textbooks and to improve upon teaching methods, encouraging the population to set and achieve goals in their lives. Through a local school competition, it encourages students to conduct research on issues such as the government's recent removal of the petroleum subsidy. The students evaluate the government's policy, suggest alternatives, and design an action plan for themselves. By studying these facets of government policy, students learn to identify problems in society, investigate all the relevant issues, and find solutions. Public school students submitted more than 3000 project ideas; of these, the selected winners will go to Amman to demonstrate their projects.

7. The DCM discussed the Embassy's support for women's rights. The Embassy meets with Muslim scholars and Members of Parliament to discuss women's and children's issues and provides grants for various projects like the Children's

Parliament. The DCM invited WFRT to come to Sanaa for further discussions and cooperation on some of the issues with Embassy staff.

Concern of the Governorate of Taiz: Water, Local Councils,
and Unemployment

18. DCM met with Mohamed Ahmed Al-Haj, the Deputy Governor and the General Secretary of Taiz to discuss the issues of chronic water shortage, the local council's cooperation with the central government, and the rate of unemployment. AlHaj thanked the DCM for paying considerable time and effort on the water problem in Taiz and the subsequent USTDA-funded wastewater management and recycling project. He believes that Taiz has potential as a tourist destination and yet concern over water shortages stymie discussions with international companies looking to construct tourist developments in Taiz. For example, the Hayel Saeed Group, the largest business conglomerate in Yemen, considered moving their base of operations from Taiz to the Lahj Province due to the ongoing water shortages. However, they recently renewed their commitment to stay in Taiz and to that end, will bring water from sea by building a desalination water station in the port city of Mokha, more than 150 kilometers away from and 3000 feet down to sea level from the mountainous area of Taiz.

19. AlHaj believes the upcoming Local Council elections will be more competitive than in years past, drawing upon a more educated and skilled pool of candidates for the elections. As the General Secretary of the Local Council, he finds the Local Council is a positive link to the tribal ways of governance and encourages cooperation with the central government. In its healthy relationship with the central government, the Local Council feels the pulse of the populace, estimates the needs of the community, negotiates municipal budgets with the central government, and monitors the progress of subsequent projects.

110. In regards to the Local Council elections, DCM urged the journalists present as well as the leadership to support transparency in media coverage of the upcoming elections and to hold debates among candidates so that each candidate and party announces their agenda and projects to the general public.

111. Despite being in the capable hands of Taiz's business and political leaders, Taiz labors under decreasing commercial prospects coupled with the high population rate common in Yemen. Only fifteen years ago, as the capital of former North Yemen, it was once a strong center of commerce where one of the largest business conglomerates in the Gulf was founded. Today, it struggles to regain the attention and aid once showered by international donors and companies in its commercial, economic development, and community development sectors. (NOTE: The population of Taiz city reaches 700, 000 people while the population of the greater governorate hovers around 3 million people. End note.) A high level of unemployment in the city and the greater governorate causes many inhabitants to migrate to other governorates. The growth rate of the city is significantly lower than in the other major cities in Yemen: Mukulla, Sanaa, Aden, Hodeidah.

112. DCM explained that the Embassy's interests in Taiz's economic development; he envisions it as a center of business, potential tourist sites, and education achievement and hopes that the wastewater management project would support further progress on this front.

US Grants Half-Million USD of Support for Wastewater
Management in Taiz

113. Taiz suffers from chronic water issues and in past visits by the Ambassador, DCM, and Econ/Commoff, Taiz's leaders repeatedly requested assistance to alleviate this dire situation. For that purpose, USTDA agreed to fund a half-million dollar feasibility study in cooperation with the World Bank (WB). Currently farmers are "stealing" untreated storm water and wastewater that runs off into local earthen pits for their irrigation needs. To provide treated water and to alleviate further pollution of the brackish water table, this US-WB project will outline a plan to treat and recycle the wastewater for other uses like agriculture.

114. DCM presented the bids to Deputy Governor AlHaj and Thabet AlHoot, the General Manager of Taiz Water Authority. In the presence of press and the public, the proposals were opened, the names announced aloud, and processed for the selection committee. DCM hopes this tender is just the beginning of more transparent tenders in Yemen. AlHoot noted that the current project is the talk of the town and that the

people Taiz feel optimistic about the Americans' support of their city and the transparency of the tender.

15. DCM highlighted the fact that as the World Bank would finance the resulting construction, this is a rare but welcome partnership between an international agency and a foreign donor in Yemen. He expressed his hope that more development of this nature would be financed by private investors as the business community takes a greater role in the community. He encouraged a new, innovative vision for development in Taiz with a partnership between private and government sectors to help reducing unemployment and gradually improve Taiz's economic situation.

Business Leaders at the Taiz Chamber of Commerce

16. DCM met with the Taiz Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Deputy Chairman Showki Hayel Saeed, a scion of the Hayel Saeed family and its business conglomerate. He noted that during his last meeting with the Chamber in March, they discussed the dire water situation in Taiz. He was glad to report the successful start of the USTDA-funded wastewater management project earlier in the day. He reiterated his hope that new proposals and projects would be financed by private investors like the leaders of the Chamber. Such projects in Taiz city would help reduce unemployment and gradually improve the economic situation.

17. He also introduced new concepts for Yemen, specifically, recycling solid garbage/waste as a for-profit venture. Recalling his work in Morocco, DCM reported that a USTDA grant provided an opportunity for businesses to invest their money in a project to recycle solid garbage for power generation and electricity. Part of the project also provided for the separation and recycling of plastic and glass components. Another concept he promoted was water desalination stations for this water-dry region; he offered the possibility of US government assistance with feasibility studies and technical assistance.

18. DCM implored the business leaders not to give up, saying that businessmen in Morocco sold vegetables and fish to the US. Shipping and marketing problems could be overcome via studies, reverse trade missions, and joint ventures with US companies.

19. Deputy Chairman Showki Hayel Saeed noted that Taiz population is migrating to other governorates. He said, "the Governor's Office and the Chamber were fortunate to have the World Bank's efforts on the serious problems of water shortage, electricity, and sewage in Taiz. Nonetheless, we are losing about 40 to 45 percent of the total water volume for human consumption on daily basis. Today's water proposal is useful but a temporary solution. Next September, the Government will provide some financial support for the September 26 National Day celebration and we will take advantage of the money to make new important projects for the city."

20. He continued, "I urge and encourage private investors to invest on Solid Waste as the DCM said, because if we invest well, the process would result in generating power and it could result in gold (high profit). Due to the high volume of waste garbage, we can establish a successful project like in Cairo or Morocco, and such projects would reduce unemployment and poverty.

21. "I suggest to Yemeni businessmen to conduct marketing segmentation and identification of customers. US goods and products have strong durability and I have US machines in my factories, which were bought in 1974 and are still working fine. I encourage all of you to do business partnership with US companies."

22. Mufid Abdo Said, the GM of Taiz Chamber of Commerce, stated that the Chamber needs to reestablish the strong relationship with USAID which they enjoyed from the 1980s until 1991 when USAID pulled out of Yemen due to Gulf War security concerns. He highlighted the need for technical assistance on conducting feasibility studies. Noting that feasibility studies could cost as much as 10 percent of a project, many small and medium businesses in Yemen do not invest their money on a brand new project due to the high cost of conducting a feasibility study. He would like to train Chamber of Commerce teams to conduct feasibility studies. In the 1980s, USAID provided technical assistance on the subject by putting instructions and guidelines on more than 8000 cassettes. He requested help with similar approaches to benefit the small and medium-size businesses.

23. He mentioned that the US-Egyptian Chamber of Commerce receives 20 percent of the US government aid annually and gives it to medium-size businesses as soft loans. He suggested that this might be a good practice for Yemen as

well.

Human Rights Center and the Broader Middle East and North
Africa (BMENA) Initiative

124. DCM discussed the work of human rights training and networking with Ezzaldeen Alasbahi, the Director of The Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC) in Taiz, a center first established in 1996. AlAsbahi tries to link between civil and tribal societies and with this effort, HRITC trained police officers, journalists, and teachers to resolve conflicts peacefully through a seminar called "Stop the Circulation and Misuse of Small Arms." He also worked with the Ministry of Planning and Media to fight terrorism by stopping corruption, noting that the spread of arms is a result of the spread of bribery and corruption.

125. HRITC has activities in other parts of the Middle East and works in close partnership with BMENA and NID. On September 19 and 20, HRITC will conduct a conference in Sanaa with the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD); many regional representatives from countries of the Middle East and North Africa will be present. The goal is to present a unified stand for the human rights organizations in the Middle East and provide a common message and position to government officials in any Middle Eastern country.
Krajeski